

May 6, 2018 – John 15:9-17

A few years ago, before he died, I saw a really interesting program about the actor Bill Paxton. Paxton was doing research into his genealogy and had traced his family through the deep south, where he had grown up, and into our lovely state of Missouri. Where they had settled during the early 1800's.

Now, Missouri at this point had just become a state. And as you're probably aware, it was a slave state. And Bill discovered, not surprisingly, that his ancestor had owned slaves.

He wasn't happy about it. No one is. But he took it as just another historical reality that can't be changed. And he continued to dig into this ancestor's history. He eventually came across his last will and testament. And it had some rather odd characteristics.

Because at the time he died, this man had two slaves. A husband & wife. And as was customary, he bequeathed them like property to his son. But then he laid down some stipulations.

They are not to be sold. Ever. They are not to be separated. They are not to be moved from their home. In fact, it is his desire and command that they be allowed to continue farming on the family's estate until the day they die.

And not only did his son carry out this wish, but he did one better. On the very next census, there's an entry for these two slaves. But they're not listed as slaves anymore. They're listed as freedmen. With their own property carved out of a corner of the family estate and given to them as their own.

It's a great story. Not a very common one in pre-Civil War history. But it shows that such a thing was possible. That people who had previously owned slaves as property could come to see them as people. And then, eventually, maybe even see them as friends.

As it turns out, this type of thing happened to masters and slaves in the ancient world too. And Jesus uses it as an analogy in our Gospel today. This lesson is from John 15. Right in the middle of the single largest recorded sermon that Jesus ever preaches. Four and a half chapters of preaching without a break.

And, of course, there's a reason for this massive sermon. It's, in many ways, Jesus' farewell sermon. It's immediately after the Last Supper. When He finishes it, He and the disciples will go out to the Garden of Gethsemane where He knows He will be arrested. This is really His very last opportunity to talk to them before they are scattered by soldiers and left terrified and grief-stricken at His crucifixion.

And what He says in this sermon is both incredibly deep and incredibly loving. He tells them about the coming of the Holy Spirit. He tells them about prayer and God's will for them. He tells them about persecution and sin. About sorrow. About joy. About His relationship with the Father. And their relationship with Him.

It's really quite expansive. It's one of those sermons where you wonder, "Wow... why didn't He just say all this up front?" I mean, it's not that Jesus' message changes. But He's a lot more forthcoming about things like calling Himself God incarnate here, than at the beginning of His ministry.

But there's a reason for that: they weren't ready. They didn't know Him. They didn't have a relationship with Him. And if He had tried to lay all that on them right when they first met, they probably would have responded very poorly. Some would have scoffed and left on the spot. The rest would have completely misunderstood. Taken His words and twisted them into their own meaning.

But now they are different. They've been with Him for three and half years. Listening. Questioning. Trusting. Believing. Until finally, Jesus looks at them, moments before He is to be taken from their midst by a band of soldiers and says: *"No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends."*

No longer do I call you servants, but friends. You're no longer just slaves doing what I tell you to do. You're no longer just students blindly taking orders from your rabbi. You're no longer just sinners obeying the Law because you'll go to hell if you don't. You're no longer my servants. You're my friends.

And what's the difference between a servant and a friend? Well, I think that's obvious: love. And with that love comes trust. Loyalty. Freedom. Sacrifice. A servant is told only what he needs to know to do his task. He's given only what he needs to have to do his work.

But a friend? Friends share everything. They share what they know. They share what they have. Jesus is inviting them join him in knowing all the blessings of heaven, because they are no longer his servants. They are His friends. And He wants them to have everything.

In many ways, Ginny, that is what today represents. At your baptism, you belonged to Christ. He took you from the clutches of the devil and he made you his own. And nothing could ever separate you from him.

But you didn't know him. He knew you. He knew you from the foundations of the earth. He planned for your salvation from before you were born. He came to this earth, died on a cross, and rose again so that you, personally, may have new life. But you didn't know him.

To know Jesus, you have to abide in Jesus. Abide in his love. Learn all that His Father has commanded you. Learn all that Jesus has done for you. Learn like you have through these years of Christian education and confirmation.

When you do that, just like his disciples did, you become more than his servant. You become his friend. And you find out just how much more there is to learn from him and from his Word.

Today is a very special day for you, just like it was for each of us when we were confirmed. Just like it was for those disciples sitting around the table with Jesus. Hearing Jesus call them his friends. That had to feel on top of the world.

But it was a feeling that would soon come crashing down on them. For what did these "friends" of Jesus do just a few short hours later. They fell asleep as He prayed with them. They abandoned Him as He was arrested. They denied even knowing Him. And, maybe worst of all, they watched Him die without any hope for His resurrection.

After spelling out for them over and over again that He would rise from the dead. Even the Pharisees remembered that He had said He would rise from the dead. That's why they put a guard at the tomb and a seal on the stone. But His own disciples? They gave up hope the moment the nails pierced His hands and feet.

They're not even good servants. And they're a sad excuse for friends. And yet, Jesus wasn't wrong to call them His friends. He doesn't make mistakes like that. If He calls you His friend, then you are His friend indeed. As He said, *"You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide."*

No, Jesus didn't make a mistake choosing those men to be His friends, anymore than He made a mistake choosing us to be His friends. Because we're no better than those twelve men. We lose focus on God's Word when we should be paying attention. We run away from Christ's path when we should follow. We deny our Lord when we should proclaim His good news. We doubt God's love when we should hope in the resurrection.

But still we are His friends. Friends invited to his table of forgiveness. Friends invited to eat of his Body and drink of his Blood. Not because we're worthy of them. Not because we're such good friends to Jesus. But because he is such a good friend to us. That he would invite us and forgive us time and time again.

As the Father loved Jesus, so Jesus loves us. As He remained in the Father, so we remain in Him. And have access to all that He would give us. Most of all, His love. His love that is so powerful it allows us love one another as friends as He has loved us as friends. And live together as children born of God into a kingdom that will never end. Amen.